

A Friend in Nanjing
Tim Peters

We were in China.

A few American undergrads on a research project we weren't ready for.

We could barely speak Chinese.

We were staying in Nanjing in the south trying to make a documentary. Trying to find subjects to film.

One day, we went to the track of Nanjing University to play catch with a frisbee I brought. A student shouted out to us. He saw my disc and called us over.

They were playing ultimate frisbee. A game that I had played at home in the U.S. And they were using top of the line frisbees, too.

It has surprised me. I had been to China the summer before but it was impossible to find a frisbee. A country with so many factories producing so much plastic stuff, I couldn't find a good disc, and here they were.

The kid who called us over was Martin. He was from northern China, studying politics at the university.

Martin said that the study abroad students from the west show them the game and brought the discs. But now the Chinese students have made their own team. They didn't have much space, just a sliver between the soccer field and the trampolines where they met and practiced every week, getting ready for matches with other schools and city teams.

So we practiced and played with them that afternoon.

We began hanging out with Martin while our research project was held up, waiting for government permission. He took us to restaurants and cafes. To monuments and universities. To parks and temples. He took us to places we never would have known otherwise.

We had long conversations about the U.S. and China, about college, about traveling, about relationships and family.

Martin was even trying to start a frisbee business to try to spread the game he loved through the country. We helped him call Disc Craft, a frisbee company in Michigan.

We kept playing ultimate frisbee. Beating other students. Making friends. Our month in Nanjing came to an end. We had to say goodbye to Martin on a platform at the train station as we left for Beijing.

It was sad saying goodbye to our first real friend from China.

MARTIN: "Welcome to China." [laughter in the background]